



Beyond Consumerism

GTI Roundtable

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Is consumer-propelled economic growth coming to an end? Maurie Cohen examines the impacts of large-scale economic shifts and emerging countercurrent lifestyles. Our panelists explore the forces changing and reinforcing consumer behavior.

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The Decline and Fall of Consumer Society?

Maurie J. Cohen

Abstract: Four decades have passed since social analysts first contemplated the unraveling of consumer society in the United States and other affluent countries. During the intervening years, the implementation of public policies based on economic deregulation, trade liberalization, and militarization forestalled, and then successfully reversed, the prospect of this transition. The political consensus that supported these strategies is now breaking down, and consumer-propelled economic growth is again becoming difficult to maintain. In conjunction with changes in once-favorable demographic, economic, social, cultural, and resource trends, the foundations of contemporary mass consumerism are eroding. Patterns of uncertainty and instability are encouraging numerous lifestyle innovations. This essay explores the hypothesis that recent developments constitute early signals of the decline and fall of consumer society, at least in the US (the focus of this essay), while recognizing that any such shift is likely to be a long, complex, and halting process.

A wave of social innovation seems to be building as prevailing conditions both inspire and compel lifestyle reinventions.

Introduction

Strong government intervention during the years after World War II facilitated the rise of fully-fledged consumer societies in the US and other affluent nations. Starting in most countries with the provision of guaranteed pensions, which reduced the need to save for retirement and increased propensities to spend, governments enacted an expanding array of policies to bolster consumerist lifestyles. For example, in response to the weakening of consumer-propelled economic growth in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a grand political bargain favoring deregulation of key economic sectors (particularly finance), liberalization of international trade, and reassertion of military power abroad reinvigorated household consumption in the US, prompting a new wave of acquisitive social striving and overspending.

Ironically, at the same moment middle-class consumption has been accelerating in China and elsewhere, this mode of social organization shows signs of fatigue in the countries that pioneered it. Since 2008, the Global North seems caught in another period of slackening economic growth, and the accompanying turbulence is encouraging incipient expressions of “post-consumerism” that are challenging old assumptions. Feverish commitment to a perverse kind of anti-Keynesianism has attenuated consumer demand and exacerbated near-recessionary conditions in many G-20 countries. Moreover, prevailing circumstances appear unlikely to change any time soon. Liberal economist Joseph Stiglitz described the state of the US economy as a “long malaise.” “The American dream, a good life in exchange for hard work” he writes, “is slowly dying.”¹

This sort of sober appraisal shifts public debate beyond normative claims about whether consumer society is good or bad, or right or wrong, to salient questions about the ongoing feasibility of an economic model founded on mass consumerism. At the same time, a wave of social innovation seems to be building as prevailing conditions both inspire and compel lifestyle reinventions. These experimental activities are starting to swell up and radiate outward because conventional arrangements are strained and people are reaching for—or fashioning for themselves—more workable options. Over time, these nascent socioeconomic forms may achieve sufficient scale to challenge, and perhaps even to supplant, incumbent structures.

The Winding Down of Economic Growth

All economic systems rest on supportive pillars that require periodic reinforcement to maintain their viability. For instance, when supplies of critical raw materials run short, substitutes must be identified or technological changes introduced. Failure to do so in a timely way runs the risk of gradual attrition or, in certain more dramatic cases, precipitous decline. Current developments at the heart of contemporary consumer society suggest such outcomes may loom in the near future in the absence of significant revitalization.

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Over many decades, three mainstays have fostered American mass consumerism: favorable demographics, rising and relatively equal income distribution, and malleable cultural values. Buttressing these props have been reliable joists, most notably facilitative government policies that, since World War II, have privileged consumer-led economic expansion and guaranteed access to ample natural resources. Under these circumstances, few people questioned consumer society: they simply saw it as an indomitable condition of everyday life.

Several cross-cutting currents are now weakening the scaffold of American consumer society: the aging of the American population, the stagnation of household income (for middle- and lower-earning households), the permeation of less consumerist values (especially among youth), and the onset of various forms of resource scarcity. At the same time, the federal government is locked in a state of political paralysis and unable to perform its customary role of recharging the capacity of consumers to drive economic growth. Many state and local governments, caught in their own austerity traps, have implemented policies that perversely sap potential for meaningful rejuvenation. There are multiple reasons to question whether policymakers have the political will to reinvigorate the purchasing power of overspent consumers.

First, on the demographic front, the median age of the US population reached its post-World War II nadir of 27.7 years in 1970. It has since risen to 36.8 years today and is expected to level out at 39.0 by 2050. Driving this process has been the aging of the “baby boomers,” born between 1946 and 1964. The households raised in this generation launched the first truly mass wave of suburbanization during the 1950s and the related phenomenon of middle-class consumer culture. As the boomers retire, however, their preferences are shifting dramatically: toward smaller homes, fewer goods, and more healthcare services.

Second, household income dynamics are changing. In the years following World War II, robust industrial employment and relatively progressive tax policies lifted wages and reduced income inequality. Median household income attained a high of just under \$55,000 in 1999 (measured in 2011 dollars) but declined to approximately \$50,000 over the next decade. Income disparity fell to a historic low in the late 1960s but then reversed course.² While easy consumer credit cushioned some of the impacts of these developments, it also contributed to rising levels of household indebtedness, bankruptcy, and foreclosures, especially for the poor.

These income trends challenge an important premise of a well-functioning consumer society, prominently championed back in 1914 by Henry Ford: worker-consumers must earn an income beyond subsistence in order to purchase the products of their labor. For this strategy to be effective, however, a collective action problem must first be overcome. Capitalist-producers have an incentive to keep the salaries of their own employees low and to rely on other employers to raise wages to boost consumption, yet if they all act on this logic, demand will prove insufficient to absorb available production. Recent trends thus raise a related question: Can consumer society persist

Twenty-somethings today have consumption preferences that are different from those of their predecessors.

in the face of a shrinking middle class? Increasing societal divergence in income makes this unlikely, since it deepens the divide between the affluent cognoscenti of positional goods and cash-strapped shoppers of quotidian commodities.³ Policymakers could try to alter this trend but do not seem to have motivation to marshal the political will to do so.

Third, research on generational cultural values suggests that twenty-somethings today have consumption preferences that are different from those of their predecessors, evincing diminished interest in material possessions, subscribing to less regularized employment practices (in part owing to prevailing labor-market conditions), and relying heavily on social media to manage relationships and daily affairs. A salient example is the millennial generation's attitude toward the most celebrated consumer good: the personal automobile. A growing proportion of the current youth generation has not even bothered to acquire a driver's license, let alone purchase a vehicle.⁴ What has prompted this change? For a youthful driver, a car is first and foremost a means of maintaining connectivity with a social network, and motorized transportation is less essential in an era of ubiquitous mobile communications. Both the commodity fetishism and the status competition previously associated with cars now apply to digital devices. In addition, youth today lean toward urban lifestyles, which enable them to dispense with the cost and inconvenience of a personal automobile, or at least to reassign a less commanding role to it. Correspondingly, the suburban home is coming in for re-examination. For more than half a century, financial incentives like the mortgage interest tax deduction and generous public subsidies for land development fostered suburbanization and sprawl, but our ongoing ability to maintain these costly entitlements remains an open question.⁵

Finally, the global system faces several types of resource scarcity, ranging from shortages of precious metals to insufficient freshwater in densely populated regions.⁶ Most recent attention has centered on "peak oil," the point at which global production reaches its zenith and then declines. We may be nearing this historic juncture. According to geologist Colin Campbell, we are consuming four barrels of oil for each one newly identified.⁷ While deepwater drilling and the exploitation of tar sands and other nonconventional sources are picking up some of the slack, the era of readily exploitable supplies is waning. In the future, if we do not successfully transition away from fossil fuels, we will need to pursue more expensive (and environmentally problematic) sources. Meanwhile, over the medium to long term, demand will continue to grow in China, India, and emerging markets in the Global South. Increasing prices will over time pose pronounced difficulties for the US, which has not appreciably improved its energy efficiency or expanded renewable sources of supply. Ultimately, inexpensive oil has encouraged profligacy and waste, and significant price increases to come will have profound repercussions on economic growth and the viability of American consumer society.

If the US and other similar countries are now reaching the limits of this mode of social organization, the time has come to consider what might happen next.

Toward a Post-Consumerist Future?

The winding down of mass consumerism can evoke the unsettling image of an indolent society, diminished and without much dynamism. However, such an inauspicious future is not inevitable, perhaps not even likely. With a longer-term perspective, we can envisage a stepwise developmental trajectory from agrarianism (pre-1800) to industrialism (1800-1945) to consumerism (1945-present). If the US and, conceivably, other similar countries are now reaching the limits of this mode of social organization, the time has come to consider what might happen next.

Although the challenge of envisioning a post-consumerist future has to date attracted little attention, if we look carefully, we can discern its auguries starting to come into view. We are seeing today in certain locales a notable upsurge in social innovation (see sidebar). Whether predicated on economic localism, self- and collective provisioning, shared ownership and use, peer-to-peer provisioning, or other expressions of post-consumerist interactions, these experiments challenge familiar means for delivering household goods and services and demonstrate potential for scaling up and extending their reach. This largely uncoordinated activity to build an economy that transcends current modes of mass consumerism is beginning what will likely be a long process. In coming years, a multitude of social innovations must evolve into a coherent systemic approach to compete with dominant economic institutions. Our inability to predict how this undertaking might develop should not detract us from considering how the fundamental conditions of contemporary consumer society are changing. Most likely, any societal transformation from mass consumerism to post-consumerism will proceed in fits and starts, with variance across regions. Some people will benefit and others will come up short, perhaps severely so. Earlier transitions of similar magnitude, such as from medieval European agrarianism to industrialism and then to global consumerism, provide valuable lessons. These prior shifts required extensive micro- and macro-scale adjustment over time, catalyzing significant disruptions in political power, economic institutions, and rhythms of everyday life.

By contrast, the defenders of the current paradigm argue that consumer society has confronted and overcome various challenges in the past and, in due course, will successfully do so again. Accordingly, declarations of decline and fall are unjustified, and talk of an impending transition is premature, if not dangerous. Some champions of consumer society go so far as to maintain that this system of social organization is essential to human flourishing and we cannot let it slip away.⁸ The faltering of consumer-propelled economic growth and the fraying of consumerist lifestyles, though, give such assertions a hollow ring.

If a historic change in the structure of consumer society is afoot, where might one go to glimpse it in fledgling form? Someone in the late eighteenth century

Ongoing changes might progressively destabilize the dominant system as it continues to lose the capacity to deliver satisfactory livelihoods.

interested in the nascent industrial age would have been wise to head to Lancashire or Manchester. Los Angeles would have been a good place to observe the flowering of post-World War II mass consumerism. Today, a place like Williamsburg (Brooklyn), because of its social diversity, cultural creativity, and adaptable infrastructure, may carry vanguard status in the transition to post-consumerism.⁹ In the US, other notable contenders include Bellingham (Washington), Portland (Oregon), Berkeley (California), and Burlington (Vermont).¹⁰

These cities are all destinations for “idio-cultural migration.”¹¹ In other words, the prevalence of alternative lifestyle practices in these places is now sufficient to induce the relocation of like-minded people, and this movement continues to expand in numbers and effects. Paradoxically, several of these locales are exploiting their geographic proximity to city-regions that are archetypes of the incumbent economic system. These ostensible forerunners of post-consumerism not infrequently draw on the financial and social capital of the mainstream economy and redirect a small measure of it to jumpstarting alternative systems of consumption (and production). A stylized example might be a household where one member is a partner in a Wall Street investment bank and the other engages in community gardening, clothing swaps, and other nascent forms of post-consumerism in the couple’s Brooklyn neighborhood. Such circumstances suggest a close entwining—perhaps even an inextricable linkage and an unavoidable dependency—between the old and the new.

Beyond the social sorting impelled by idio-cultural migration, how might a transition to post-consumerism plausibly gather momentum? Novel practices cannot spring into existence in whole form. Incipient routines will emerge out of prevailing forms in a halting and partial manner and will not quickly or thoroughly displace the customary institutions that support and facilitate contemporary mass consumerism. Industrialism, for example, only gradually supplanted agrarianism, developing a co-dependent relationship with it (industrial workers had to eat, and farmers increasingly needed tractors). Rather than leaving consumerist lifestyles completely behind, ongoing changes might progressively destabilize the dominant system as it continues to lose the capacity to deliver satisfactory livelihoods. These changes demonstrate that consumer society will not be the final chapter of human experience. The question then becomes what the following system will be and how we will make sure that it is equitable, just, and sustainable.

Post-consumerist Social Innovations

Collaborative consumption, or the sharing economy: Collaborative consumption involves using durable goods more efficiently, often through collective use and rental arrangements. The Internet has facilitated these modes of exchange by reducing search costs and readily connecting buyers and sellers, owners and users, for short-term exchanges of cars, household space, tools, and much more.

Community energy and food production: An alternative to procuring energy and food from distant and anonymous producers, community energy and food production stresses the importance of relocalization and frequently features the establishment of collective ownership as a means of ensuring local control of energy and food supplies.

Local living economy: Developed in large part by the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), this approach facilitates the development of community-based systems of production and consumption, the strengthening of localized economic relationships, and the promotion of fair exchange.

Mindful consumption: Proponents of mindful consumption strive to make a business case for reducing the purchase and use of consumer products and enabling consumers to achieve lifestyle satisfaction in ways that do not involve material goods.

Peer-to-peer provisioning: P2P provisioning is an extension of Internet-based collaborative networks that allow participants to engage directly in transactional activities without the need for a retail intermediary. Vehicle sharing and social lending are two particularly prominent examples.

Prosumption: Prosumption refers to co-creation of economic value through the combined efforts of producers and consumers. The term was coined in 1980 by futurist Alvin Toffler and captures activities ranging from operation of an automatic teller machine (ATM) to community-supported agriculture.

Self and communal cultivation/fabrication: This area of activity denotes production and consumption activities that are carried out on an individual or collective basis. Notable examples include home-based and communal vegetable gardening as well as the personal manufacture of furniture and other artifacts. The advent of 3D printing technology could further this type of provisioning.

Unconsumption: Unconsumption refers to post-acquisition activities pertaining to the recycling, creative reuse, and repurposing of goods as well as to efforts to maximize satisfaction from the use of purchased products.

Endnotes

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3. See, for example, Chrystia Freeland, *Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super Rich and the Fall of Everyone Else* (New York: Penguin, 2012).
4. Refer to issue 33(3) of the journal *Transport Reviews* for a comprehensive overview of the "peak car" phenomenon, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01441647.2013.804133#preview>.
5. A notable feature of the final report of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform (known as the Simpson-Bowles Commission) was its recommendation calling for elimination of the mortgage interest deduction. See <http://www.fiscalcommission.gov>. See also Robert Pozen, "Heretic Reality: Mortgage Interest Deduction Needs to Be Slashed," *Forbes*, March 25, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2011/03/25/heretic-reality-mortgage-interest-deduction-needs-to-be-slashed/>.
6. Michael Klare, *The Race for What's Left: The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012).
7. Global oil discovery peaked in 1965, when approximately two new barrels were identified for each barrel consumed.
8. See, for example, Doug Stephens, *The Retail Revival: Reimagining Business for the New Age of Consumerism* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013) and James Livingston, *Against Thrift: Why Consumer Culture is Good for the Economy, the Environment, and Your Soul* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
9. See Ben Schiller, "Brooklyn as a Lab to Amplify Urban Ideas," *Fast Co.EXIST*, November 10, 2011, <http://www.fastcoexist.com/1678795/brooklyn-as-a-lab-to-amplify-urban-ideas>.
10. At the country-scale level, interest in Japan as a potential progenitor of post-consumerism is beginning to coalesce. See, for example, Maurie Cohen, "Turning Japanese," *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy* 7, no. 2 (2011), <https://sspp.proquest.com/turning-japanese-591125720569>.
11. Jason Kaufman and Matthew Kaliner, "The Re-accomplishment of Place in Twentieth Century Vermont and New Hampshire: History Repeats Itself, Until It Doesn't," *Theory and Society* 40, no. 2 (2011): 119-154, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11186-010-9132-2>.

About the Author



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Roundtable



Julian Agyeman

Although Maurie Cohen alludes to technological trends at times, I think we should further explore the role technology has played in challenging the consumerist paradigm by facilitating the rise of the peer-to-peer sharing economy and changing views about ownership. We must also look at its limitations.

The web first enabled free sharing both of information, through sites like Wikipedia and Facebook, and of digital media, through sites like Napster and YouTube, and now Spotify and a host of other mainstream legal music sharing services. Now, new technology is also facilitating the sharing and management of material resources. The combination of open-access web platforms for offering and booking sharing opportunities, and real-time smart systems for helping match users and allocate shared resources—such as in city bike sharing schemes—have transformed the potential for sharing.

Conventional second hand markets for goods have moved online in many countries with the growth of sites like eBay and Gumtree, or Descolaá in Brazil, where consumers can sell, exchange, and buy products and services. Low transaction costs have enabled the establishment of gift-based approaches such as Freecycle, in which usable goods are simply given away online, and, more dramatically, the emergence of sharing platforms which allow for the rental of personal goods such as cars, tools, and spare bedrooms and the sale of services such as meal-sharing. And this is not just in the West. Xiaozhu.com is a Chinese online service for short-term property rental.

However, we must note that despite the widespread diffusion of mobile and Internet technology, there are still many, both domestically globally, without such access. The increase in popularity of sharing systems in mainstream culture is not, however, without its complexities. Equity needs to be considered in the design of sharing programs—ideally with the participation of likely users. Currently, it is all too often an afterthought in formal sharing schemes such as bike and car sharing

programs, where a credit card or up-front fee/deposit is typical and effectively excludes those on low incomes.

Informal sharing systems, in which those on lower incomes tend to participate, are often left out of much of the current sharing dialogue. Informal sharing describes sharing activity such as carpooling and day care systems undertaken collectively to reduce economic burdens and increase opportunity, rather than to meet any other higher environmental or personal goals. Informal sharers and sharing need to be better recognized and their practice de-stigmatized. The growth of sharing in middle-class and bourgeois bohemian groups offers some hope that sharing in general is becoming less stigmatized, but this trend seems unlikely to spread to all forms and groups without specific support. Rather than expecting sustainable consumption patterns to spread via “fashion” from the bourgeois bohemian culture to other groups, we must acknowledge that ‘Main Street America’ needs interventions that target their needs for basic services and economic stability through shared services and resources.

About the Author



Julian Agyeman is a Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University. He is an environmental social scientist with degrees in botany, geography, conservation policy, and environmental education. His current research focuses on the complex and embedded relations between humans and the environment and the effects of this on public policy and planning processes and outcomes, particularly in relation to notions of justice and equity. He co-founded the Black Environment Network, the first environmental justice-based organization of its kind in Britain, in 1988 and served as chair until 1994. He is the co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*. He is a Visiting Professor at Northumbria University in Newcastle-on-Tyne, UK, and a Senior Scholar at The Center for Humans and Nature.



John Ehrenfeld

As always, Maurie Cohen offers us much food for thought, but, in this case, the food produced a bit of indigestion. The article, as many others do, conflates economic growth and consumerism. The first is a term arising in economics and refers to the behavior of aggregate measures of output, while the second arises within sociology and describes the macro character of a social unit. These two distinctions are tied together in practice but should be treated separately in a critical article such as this one.

Growth is dependent on the attitudes that consumers bring to the market, but it is also affected by the resources available to them. The loss of personal resources in the recent recession and in prior similar economic downturns tends to suppress consumer purchases. Attitudes and motivation for making purchases may, however, remain relatively constant while the GDP and other measures of growth decrease. This micro-macro linkage is a fairly standard part of conventional neoclassical economics. If one is to tease out changes in the attitudinal or motivational basis for market activities, the macro-economic part must be very carefully controlled in any analysis. Cohen hints at this linkage but fails to make a clear cleavage.

The parts of his article suggesting that growth may be peaking are not particularly debatable. The standard theories that see scarcity as simply indicated by a large increase in the price of a good or commodity, as pointed out in the work of Herman Daly and others, are inadequate to describe an economy where actual physical shortage begins to curtail growth unaffected by the emergence of technological substitutes that alleviate the situation. But the connection between this phenomenon and the end of consumerism is very weak. In spite of the several new ways for provisioning mentioned in the article, there is little evidence that basic consumerist attitudes are changing. One can point to demographic, social, and economic niches where one finds such signs, but not so much as to indicate that consumerism is waning as the primary cultural driver in the US.

Economic institutions do respond to changes in the cultural engine that drives them as well as changes in the external world. The financial collapse attests to the rapidity with which such changes can happen. But this is not so with cultural attributes. The belief structure, in this case, the dominant psychological model of humans as insatiable needy creatures, will keep us locked into a consumerist mode until a different fundamental belief supersedes it. We are all immersed in consumerist cultural signals—ads, presidential exhortations (Bush’s “Go shopping”), cheap goods—which keep our existing beliefs and norms in place. A problematic generational change is in the offing when our young, at least in the US, enter the consumerist world very early on, e.g. 3-year-olds with iPads.

I certainly share Cohen’s concerns and aspirations. But let’s not get confused about what is happening out there with what we believe should and, maybe, must happen. Do not get overly excited over the emergence of alternate lifestyles. History is full of examples of the emergence and demise of such subcultures. The parsimony of the Shakers is hard to find today. For one last comment, we exist in a global world. We need to ask whether whatever changes away from consumerism we spot in the US and other affluent countries are being swamped by the rush toward consumerism seen in the rest of the world.

About the Author



John Ehrenfeld retired in 2009 as Executive Director of the International Society for Industrial Ecology after guiding its development since its founding in 2000. After a long career in the environmental field, he became a professor in 1985 and retired in 2000 as Director of the MIT Program on Technology, Business, and Environment. He currently serves on the adjunct faculty at the Marlboro College Graduate Center, where he teaches "Exploring Sustainability" to students in their MBA for Managing Sustainability program. He is the editor of the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* and has authored or co-authored over 200 papers, books, reports, and other publications, most notably *Sustainability by Design: A Subversive Strategy for Transforming our Consumer Culture*. He holds a BS and ScD in Chemical Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



Emily Huddart Kennedy

I should preface this critique by saying that I appreciate the positive lens of Maurie Cohen's viewpoint. A colleague of mine has spoken of the need for sociology that is more positive, and this certainly fits the bill. That said, my comments will be primarily argumentative, speaking directly to Maurie Cohen's points of evidence of the winding down of economic growth.

(1) The aging of the American population

This trend is assumed to lead to smaller homes, fewer consumer goods, and more healthcare services. To the best of my knowledge, one reason for a shift to smaller homes is that the elderly are less likely to live with their families than in the past, and that the boomer preference for large homes in low-density suburbs has now become the status quo in most jurisdictions. That these boomers now want higher density and smaller home options is part of what is driving up real estate prices in city centers, making it more difficult for those with less money to live there, and fostering a second wave of moves to the suburbs. The second wave is characterized less by wealthy elites and more so by new immigrants and families with young children.

(2) The decrease in income levels

Cohen asks whether a consumer society can persist in the face of a shrinking middle class. He reasons that this seems unlikely because increasing income inequality deepens the divide between the affluent consumers of boutique goods and the non-affluent consumers of prosaic commodities. Though I agree with his response in principle, I don't believe it answers his question. In contrast, some of the institutions propping up a consumer society, such as access to credit and the world of cheap goods (with considerable social and environmental externalities), are well-documented. Tackling the premises of such evidence would build a more convincing argument.

(3) Youth have different consumer preferences.

I love reading the statistics that show youth are not getting cars or licenses in droves as they once did. However, I remain unconvinced that this trend is a result of diminished interest in consumer goods. In fact, I am often challenged by what I see amongst my students as the view that consumption alone is the path to creating a brighter future (which to me suggests a deeper entrenchment of the consumer society, i.e., when civic engagement becomes commodified). For instance, I just finished grading a paper where the student wrote, "In our capitalist world, nothing speaks louder than our actions as consumers." The future Cohen suggests is still far away.

About the Author



Emily Huddart Kennedy is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Washington State University. An environmental sociologist by training, she studies how people respond to environmental issues. This broad topic area includes studies of downshifting, sustainable consumption, local food politics, pro-environmental behaviour, environmental values, and carbon footprint research. In particular, she has looked at the structural and individual antecedents of sustainable lifestyles (including urban design, social networks, and environmental values) as well as the functioning of sustainable food citizens and the role of ecological citizens.



William Rees

Maurie Cohen argues that “[s]trong government intervention during the years after World War II facilitated the rise of fully-fledged consumer society in the US and other affluent nations” and later “reinvigorated household consumption in the US, prompting a new wave of acquisitive social striving and overspending.” This may be true, but I think it underplays the role of the corporate sector in using the tools of public relations and advertising to deliberately construct and subsequently promote consumer lifestyles. To break people of their habit of “underconsuming” (a habit induced by the depression and wartime rationing), American industry organized in the post WW-II period to encourage a throwaway society and embrace consumption as an end in itself. In a 1955 paper, retail analyst Victor Lebow explained that Americans were to “make consumption their way of life” and that if they succeeded in making the buying and use of goods into a kind of ritual, they would find “spiritual satisfaction and ego gratification in consumption.”

This was no trivial transformation. People remain largely unconscious of the extent to which they have been shaped and manipulated by the purposeful construction of *consumerism-as-way-of-life*. The two most recent generations of North Americans are arguably the most successfully socially-engineered generations of people ever to walk the earth. And a multibillion dollar advertising industry remains in place, dedicated, in part, to extending the game by creating an unending flow of artificial needs that an equally unending stream of new or improved products claims to meet.

Industry’s triumph did not end with sophisticated public relations. The capstone was the subsequent deep infusion of society with market capitalist values, the erosion of the public sector, and the weakening of people’s sense of the public good. It would be cause for celebration if, as Cohen suggests, this political consensus is in fact collapsing. The nature of mass consumption may be changing, but its aggregate scale and ecological footprint are still in excess of Earth’s regenerative capacity.

Moreover, although Cohen notes that novel economic structures cannot “spring into existence in whole form,” but rather “emerge out of the prevailing system in a halting and partial manner,” his closing thoughts introduce a disquieting ambiguity. On the one hand, he seems to assume a more or less smooth transition to the next phase of human civilization during which novel social forms gradually “displace the customary institutions that support and facilitate contemporary consumerism.” On the other hand, he notes, “Rather than leaving consumerist lifestyles completely behind, ongoing changes might progressively destabilize the dominant system as it continues to lose the capacity to deliver satisfactory livelihoods.”

The notion of “progressive destabilization” here fires my imagination and not necessarily in the divining of a comfortable steady-state society or some other similarly welcoming scenario. Let’s assume that Cohen is correct that the global system will continue to experience “several types of resource scarcity.” Let’s also assume that governments remain unmotivated to address the widening income gap. Now, put all of this in a broader global context—continuing population growth, growing material demand propelled by a cultural narrative rooted in competitive individualism, deregulated markets in an era of accelerating climate change, and increasing distrust of both corporations and governments. In these circumstances, sustained efforts to maintain business-as-usual in industrial countries, and to continue the transformation of the developing world along similar lines, may well be fatal to prospects for global civilization. They are certainly likely to generate a future of widespread civil unrest/insurrection and geopolitical conflict—including resource wars and territorial conflicts—exacerbated by the mass migration of millions of climate refugees.

So much for a smooth transition to sustainable stability.

About the Author



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Author's Response



Response to Comments

I am grateful to John Ehrenfeld, Bill Rees, Emily Huddart-Kennedy, and Julian Agyeman for their perceptive feedback. All four commentators have prompted me to dig deeper into my proposition of a putative post-consumerist transition. For all of the debate surrounding processes of social change, history is replete with evidence that we are not very good at distinguishing moments of transition in real time. For instance, few observers initially recognized the early phase of tumultuous upheaval during the middle of the eighteenth century as a precursor of a new system of social and economic organization. Indeed, only in 1837, when the French radical socialist Auguste Blanqui articulated the idea of an “industrial revolution,” did that awareness begin to take hold. Similarly, otherwise astute witnesses have tended to dismiss the early outcropping of ultimately transformative innovations—from the automobile to the telephone to the computer—as inconsequential and of little enduring value.

The unfortunate truth is that we lack prescient capacity to comprehend change, even when it is staring us in the face. The development of ostensibly rigorous scientific methods has not markedly enhanced our ability to extrapolate from the present into the future. Part of the reason for this paradox is that these techniques are inherently conservative and hamstrung by skeptical bias. Standard approaches entail studying large datasets and are prone to misconstrue embryonic social changes either as bothersome “noise” or as variation that does not satisfy statistical tests. In short, we lack resolve to sound the alarm until well after the smoldering has turned into a state of full combustion.

Newness generally coalesces out of experiments at the margins, in relatively isolated niches where there is flexibility to deviate from customary routines. These small movements are obscured in large aggregations because they are invisible against a much wider and deeper background of “normal” activity. To catch a glimpse of change, we need to dampen our fear of misconstruing initial

signs of genuine inventiveness and fleeting fad. And perhaps a little hopeful expectation is not an altogether bad thing. After all, anticipating alternative futures is an essential part of nurturing them into existence.

Our hesitancy is, though, not only attributable to overreliance on statistical methods. To chart a post-consumerist pathway, we will likely need to dispense with conventional discipline-based procedures more generally. Social scientists of different stripes have long argued about the moving forces behind epochal change, but such debates are ultimately academic, if not pedantic. If we adopt a systems perspective, trying to disentangle demographics, economics, politics, and culture quickly becomes futile. These dimensions are tightly entwined and co-evolve in complex and mutually dependent ways. Moreover, the lines of demarcation among them are largely manifestations of either conceit or historical accident.

I do not mean to suggest that we should selectively cherry-pick favorable indications and ignore contrary markers. Indeed, there is already reason to suspect that proponents of a “sharing economy” have been overtaken by their enthusiasm. Much of what is heralded as sustainable expressions of collaborative consumption is neither sustainable nor collaborative. When I pick up a Zipcar or similarly provisioned vehicle at the curb, I am partaking in a well-worn ritual of renting a vehicle on a short-term basis. From the standpoint of “sharing,” how is the Zipcar that I collect in the central city any different from the Avis car that I get at the airport? Moreover, the fact that both vehicles are now owned by the same company would seem to dissolve any superficial distinction that might have previously existed.

One could say the same about several other prominent archetypes of an emergent “sharing” economy. As Tom Slee has argued, the vast majority of listings on Airbnb are not placed by hospitable locals with a spare room but rather by owners of second homes seeking travelers willing to pay a portion of the carrying costs. Another celebrated example, Task Rabbit, is little more than an employment broker for casual labor. Given the positive valance that has in recent years come to surround sharing, there is no shortage of clever entrepreneurs fashioning ways to exploit the possibilities of pretense. Because collaboration has popular appeal, all manner of activities are being opportunistically crowded under the sharing tent. To the extent that sustainability is a priority, we need to be attentive that any novelty that drops the cost of an activity will almost surely encourage us to do more of it.

The challenge going forward, if we accept the provisional idea that our familiar consumer society is starting to break down, will be to formulate strategies that enable us to assess the degree to which a transition might be stirring. Standard measures of commercial well-being like changes in retail square footage are unlikely to be sufficient because customary shopping alternatives are already giving way to Internet-propelled commerce. Brick and mortar video shops were the first victims of online commerce, soon to be followed by bookstores and a host of other specialty retailers, especially those geared to youthful shoppers. None of these developments are themselves indicative of a transformation toward post-consumerism.

A most effective strategy for discerning such a shift is likely to entail getting in the streets (and cyberspace) and adopting the practices of guerrilla marketers who canvass communities deemed to be on the sharp edge of social and cultural innovation. I previously drew attention to Williamsburg as one possible locale, but there are surely others in the United States and elsewhere. In conducting this work, it will be important to be attentive to opportunities for scalability and who will take on the task of growing new ideas beyond the incubators where they incipiently take hold.